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ВО МЕЃУНАРОДНОТО НАУЧНО СПИСАНИЕ „ПАЛИМПСЕСТ“

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DIALOGUE THROUGH BALLADS: CONSTRUCTING MEANING IN BALKAN ORAL TRADITION

Valbona Kalo

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Abstract: This research examines the role of ballads as powerful instruments for dialogue and meaning-making across various cultural contexts. Ballads are viewed as dynamic narrative forms that serve a dual purpose: preserving cultural heritage and facilitating the transmission of universal values such as love, sacrifice, and heroism. By employing a comparative literary approach, this study highlights how these recurring themes in ballads act as bridges for cross-cultural empathy, promoting mutual understanding across different societies. The analysis also emphasizes the ability of ballads to transcend geographical and cultural boundaries, uniting diverse populations through shared emotional and experiential connections. The research findings suggest that ballads foster a collective human experience and function as effective mediums for intercultural communication. Drawing on theoretical frameworks from anthropology and cultural studies, the paper argues that integrating ballads into educational and intercultural initiatives could significantly enhance mutual respect and understanding among diverse groups. Such integration would provide a powerful tool for promoting cultural exchange and fostering deeper connections between individuals and communities from various backgrounds.

Keywords: *ballads, intercultural communication, narrative analysis, cultural heritage, universal themes, dialogue.*

1. Introduction

The ballad, a literary form as ancient as it is evocative, serves as a fundamental bridge in the narrative traditions of many cultures. Defined in various ways across geographical areas and historical periods, the ballad typically appears as a poetic narrative, often rich with elements of folklore, history, and personal values. This form has not only endured over the centuries but has also adapted, reflecting the social and cultural currents of its time. In the Middle Ages, the term “ballad” was defined as “a dance song that accompanied communal rituals and celebrations” (Taylor, 1964, p. 29). Over time, however, the ballad transcended this initial definition to encompass a wide range of themes and structures, from the supernatural to the historical, across diverse cultural landscapes.

In Albanian folklore, the ballad is primarily recognized not for its origins as a dance song, but for its role in narrative storytelling, often without a chorus or regular verse structure, yet rich in drama and emotional depth. According to the Albanian Dictionary, the ballad is defined as “a short poem or rhyme in regular verses, with a narrative character, usually with a popular and lyrical feel, depicting a historical, legendary, or heroic event” (Academy of Sciences of Albania, 2006, p. 48). However, this definition only scratches the surface of the ballad’s depth in Albanian culture, where it is often intertwined with epic and mythical elements, narrating everything from family life to heroic deeds with profound emotional resonance.

In this context, it is essential to understand the function of the ballad as a carrier of collective memory and societal norms. As Dundes (1965) points out, “Folklore acts as a medium for expressing a society’s norms and values, reinforcing and transmitting these values through inherited literary forms” (p. 120). Albanian and Balkan ballads play a vital role in reflecting and transmitting cultural values across generations. The study of these ballads spans multiple disciplines, reflecting their rich historical, cultural, and literary dimensions. Scholars like Zheji and Çetta have emphasized the complex interplay of real and fantastical elements within these ballads, noting that “these songs, although legendary, are deeply rooted in the cultural and historical contexts that give rise to their legends” (Zheji, 1994, p. 73; Çetta, 1974, p. 55). Shaplo also elaborates on the ballad’s ability “to present the moral and tragic dimensions of human life, resonating deeply with listeners through its narrative form” (Shaplo, 1984, p. 65).

Historically, ballads have played a central role in folklore and literary studies due to their ability to encapsulate cultural narratives and social values. A key aspect of analyzing ballads involves understanding their influence on social and gender structures, with researchers like Shaplo (1984) highlighting how they express moral and tragic dimensions of life, resonating emotionally with audiences (p. 69). Furthermore, Lotman’s (1976) concept of the “semiosphere” is integral to understanding how ballads, as “systems within systems”, facilitate complex cultural dialogues that bridge diverse cultural experiences.

Through the analysis of ballads such as the “The Ballad of the Woman in the Wall”, “The Ballad of the Resurrected Brother”, and the “Ballads of Resurrection”, different dimensions of human experience and deeply embedded cultural values in the historical and social context of the region are revealed. These ballads, prominent for themes of sacrifice, resurrection, and heroism, not only hold significant value within their respective cultural narratives but also resonate with universal human experiences. A comparative literary analysis, focusing on both content and stylistic elements across Balkan regions, helps identify common motifs and culturally specific variations, illuminating how these ballads reflect and shape social values and community identities.

The purpose of this exploration is to uncover how ballads act as cultural mediators, carrying significant historical and moral weight, while fostering intercultural dialogue and enhancing mutual understanding among diverse audiences. Ballads, with their thematic depth and narrative complexity, serve as

effective tools for teaching about diversity, cultural empathy, and the universal aspects of human experience.

2. Rites and history of sacrifice in Balkan ballads: an anthropological and semiotic perspective

Love, sacrifice, and heroism are universal themes that resonate across all cultures. Ballads that address these themes function as common points of recognition and understanding between different cultures, where sacrifice can be seen as an anthropological phenomenon within a specific time and space. In the study of Balkan ballads depicting human sacrifice in the foundations of buildings, a shared theme of sacrifice for greater purposes is observed, manifesting across various cultures from the Balkans to the Far East.

According to Vargyas (1967), folk tales describing the tragic fate of individuals—often the master builder’s wife—buried in the foundations of new structures are an essential part of these ballads. These narratives are well-known throughout the Balkan Peninsula and beyond, in Eastern Europe, Turkey, and Asia, “reflecting a sacrificial tradition that has been discussed for more than 150 years” (Grimm, 1835, p. 45).

The contribution of early collectors such as Thimi Mitko has been crucial in documenting and preserving Albanian folk ballads. His work, “Bleta Shqiptare” (The Albanian Bee), includes variants of the walled-up ballad, specifically referring to the building of the Arta Bridge (Mitko, 1981). These ballads, which depict human sacrifice in construction, are prevalent in many regions of Albania, such as Shkodra, Dukagjini, Kruja, Durrës, and Elbasan, demonstrating how a universal theme like sacrifice adapts to local needs and conditions, particularly in the context of building castles and bridges.

The sacrifice of women in Balkan ballads is closely linked to ancient rituals aimed at ensuring the prosperity of communities. The woman, often envisioned as a symbol of fertility, becomes the ideal victim to ensure the stability and success of the new structure. According to Frazer (1922), these rites represent an effort to appease the forces of nature and guarantee the fertility of the land and the well-being of the community. This explains why sacrifice is a central motif in these ballads, “making the woman a key element in the creation of enduring structures” (Frazer, 1922, p. 89). In the Balkan context, variations of walled-up ballads show how communities have adapted this motif to address social and emotional issues. For example, in some Croatian variants, the woman is spared from being walled in, showing a more lenient approach to sacrifice, while in the Serbian and Albanian versions, the sacrifice remains a central tragic element. This distinction “reflects different cultural influences on the concept of sacrifice and how it relates to societal values” (Vargyas, 1967, p. 104). A clear example of this is the Albanian legend “Legjenda e Rozafës” (The Legend of Rozafa), where the bride asks to leave a window open so she can continue breastfeeding her child even after being entombed: “Nji amanet-o po ju la, / Kur në mur-o t’më muri, / Sy’n e djathtë t’m’a leni jashtë, / Dor’n e djathtë t’m’a leni jashtë, / se e kam lane djalë të vogël” (“One last wish I leave you, / When you wall me up, / Leave my right eye outside,

/ Leave my right hand outside, / For I have left my young son.”) (*Visaret e Kombit*, 1937, p. 244).

Similarly, the Macedonian variant, “Сидане на Скопје” (*Zidanje na Skopje*, The Building of Skopje), reflects the same sacrificial motif, where a woman is sacrificed to ensure the success of the new structure. The common points between the Albanian and Macedonian ballads include the sacrifice of a married woman, a symbolic act that reinforces her connection to family and nature. This theme has been extensively analyzed in Balkan folklore studies, including Dushi (2015), who revisits interpretations of its symbolic and cultural significance.

Each Balkan variant of this ballad reflects the ethnic characteristics of the area where it was found and recorded. As Zimmerman (1979) notes, “Even if the ballad came from India, it was in the Balkans that it was preserved” (Zimmerman, 1979, pp. 371–380). Dundes (1996) found that over 700 variants of the walled-up wife ballad had been published and widely recognized by that time, offering an opportunity for comparative and cross-cultural analysis (Dundes, 1996, p. 185). These ballads represent a shared cultural phenomenon that transcends national and ethnic boundaries.

The sacrifice in Balkan ballads carries a powerful symbolism, which is not limited to the physical act of building but also encompasses the complex relationships between individuals and society. In these ballads, building is not merely an architectural process; it is a symbolic act representing the creation of social structures and the reorganization of communities. Lotman (1976) emphasizes that ballads and folk poetry constitute “systems within systems”, involving “various lexical, syntactic, and phonological levels that interact to produce powerful literary effects” (Lotman, 1976, p. 43).

In many of these ballads, the construction of a bridge or a castle is not just a physical act but a symbol of power and isolation. Bridges represent openness and connection between communities, while castles symbolize isolation and protection from external forces. The sacrifice of the woman makes the construction stable, placing her role as a representative of fertility and connection to the earth and nature at the center. This semiotic perspective shows how the act of building and sacrifice reflects social changes and the tensions related to organizing the community and protecting it from external influences. Ljubomira Parpulova (1984) approaches the walled-up wife ballad from a semiotic perspective, highlighting that the motif of sacrificing the woman is a symbolic structure reflecting the rite of passage for women into social and familial roles, as well as control over their bodies for higher purposes. She argues that the woman’s sacrifice “reflects the conflict between her role as a creator and society’s efforts to ensure the stability of structures through her sacrifice” (Parpulova, 1984, p. 45).

From a feminist perspective, the woman’s sacrifice in these ballads can be interpreted as a metaphor for her subjugation in patriarchal societies. Bruno Bettelheim (1983) adds that the woman’s sacrifice reflects men’s control over her body, turning it into a tool for maintaining social and architectural structures. Her sacrifice for the construction of a castle or a bridge “symbolizes the denial of her autonomy and the reinforcement of patriarchal structures” (Bettelheim, 1983, p. 62).

While Bettelheim (1983, p. 64), citing Arnold van Gennep, emphasizes that sacrifice can be seen as a form of a rite of passage, where the woman transitions from an autonomous individual to an object sacrificed for the community's benefit, he argues that the act of walling up the woman represents a male fantasy for control and sexual and social dominance. Building a stable structure through sacrifice "is a metaphor for male control over women and the effort to maintain power over them". The woman's sacrifice in these ballads is a metaphor for married life, where marriage represents the entrapment of the woman within the patriarchal structures of men. This sacrifice clearly reflects the inferior status of women in these societies, where her sacrifice is justified for building larger, more stable structures like castles and bridges. In recent years, scholars in cultural anthropology, theology, religious studies, and philosophy have brought sacrifice back into focus, highlighting the complex and emotionally charged relationships between sacrifice and violence, self-sacrifice and autonomy, and religious martyrdom and terrorism. In their research and debates, "they have sought to reach the core of the current fascination with sacrifice" (Bekkenkamp & Sherwood, 2003, p. 14).

The growing interest of scholars in understanding sacrifice in modern times is also reflected in how the walled-up ballads remain significant in popular culture and how they are renewed and interpreted across generations. This attention to sacrifice as a universal theme indicates a continuity and development of narratives about sacrifice and their role in shaping cultural and social identity. Through these connections, we can see how the walled-up ballads not only carry a rich cultural heritage but also offer a means to explore and discuss complex and challenging themes of sacrifice in contemporary societies. Studying these ballads from a synchronic perspective allows their observation in the contemporary context, while a diachronic approach reveals their developments and changes over time. This helps in understanding how cultural traditions adapt and evolve, as well as the role they play in shaping cultural and historical identity. In conclusion, sacrifice in Balkan ballads remains a topic of great importance, not only as an ancient ritual but also as a profound symbol reflecting social, gender, and cultural relationships. As recent studies in cultural anthropology and religious studies show, sacrifice is a concept that continues to captivate the human imagination and highlights the complex relationships between self-sacrifice, personal autonomy, and duty to the community. Modern interest in this theme demonstrates how walled-up ballads remain significant in popular culture and continue to be interpreted across generations, illustrating their continuity and relevance in various historical and cultural contexts. These ballads offer a rich lens through which to discuss the complex themes of sacrifice and violence and reflect on the role of women and gender relations in patriarchal societies. Examining these ballads from a synchronic perspective allows us to analyze how they resonate with contemporary contexts, while a diachronic approach helps us understand the developments and transformations that have occurred over the centuries. This combination allows us to see how cultural traditions evolve and how these narratives help shape a nation's cultural and historical identity.

3. The Dead Brother motif in Balkan ballads: themes of promise, sacrifice, and honor

Structure and symbolism of the Dead Brother motif in Balkan ballads

The dead brother motif is one of the oldest and most widespread themes in Balkan oral literature, appearing among Albanians, Greeks, Serbs, Bulgarians, Macedonians, Romanians, and Aromanians. This motif not only reflects deep familial bonds and the pain of loss but also incorporates significant elements of mythology, folk beliefs, and the moral codes of the region (Arapi, 1986). Across the Balkans, this motif has emerged as a collective memory, passed down through songs and ballads, often emphasizing the strong patriarchal structure of Balkan societies and the profound emotional connections between family members, particularly between brother and sister.

Structurally, the motif centers on a widowed mother with many sons and one daughter. The youngest brother becomes the cause of his sister's marriage to a distant land. After the brothers die—either from plague or in war—the dead brother rises from his grave, often motivated by the tears of the mother or sister, and returns the sister home. This act of symbolic return is frequently linked to the overwhelming emotional shock experienced by the mother and daughter, leading to their death or transformation into birds. Variations of this narrative can be seen in both Albanian and Bulgarian ballads, highlighting the motif's enduring presence in Balkan culture. The act of resurrection, often driven by the mother or sister's tears, “emphasizes the importance of besa (a word of honor) and the promise to maintain family unity, even beyond death” (Fochi, 1975, p. 67). However, scholars like Karakostea (1938) have argued that the **Dead Brother's Song** and the **Legend of Lenore**, common in Western European countries such as England, Scandinavia, Germany, and Italy, may have evolved as independent motifs. Karakostea (1938) states that “the motif of the brother and sister traveling together at night is older than that of the dead fiancé traveling with his betrothed” (p. 102). This distinction reflects the cultural significance of sibling relationships in the Balkans, where patriarchal values and strong familial bonds persisted for longer. In other parts of Europe, historical developments gradually introduced new characters such as the fiancé and fiancée, emphasizing romantic relationships over familial ones. In contrast, the Balkan tradition preserved the primacy of brother-sister relationships, often symbolizing sacrifice and familial duty, as seen in the three major Albanian versions of the ballad: “Kënga e Halil Garrişë” (*The Song of Halil Garria*), “Kënga e Dhoqinës” (*The Song of Dhoqina*), and “Kënga e Kostandinit dhe Garentinës” (*The Song of Konstantin and Garentina*).

The Dead Brother motif transcends the realm of mere folklore; it serves as a symbolic bridge between the living and the dead, showing how familial duties and brotherly love extend beyond the physical world. Through this motif, Balkan ballads reinforce the concepts of eternity and honor, where words and promises hold performative power, capable of altering reality, even after death. The Macedonian version of the ballad, known as “Мртoв брат на повратки” (**Mrto v brat na povratki**, The Return of the Dead Brother), reflects the same core themes of familial duty and sacrifice found in the Albanian “Kostandini dhe

Doruntina” (**Konstantin and Doruntina**). As documented by Verkovic (1985) in **Makedonski narodni umotvorbi (Macedonian Folk Creations**, vol. 2, pp. 205–207), this ballad illustrates the symbolic motif of a brother fulfilling his promise even beyond death. Both versions emphasize the brother as the savior and protector of the family, highlighting the importance of honor and fulfilling promises, even beyond the grave.

Despite these similarities, there are significant differences between the Macedonian and Albanian versions. The Albanian ballad lacks explicit discussion about the sister’s marriage and does not feature Halil Garria as the guarantor of her return. In contrast, the Macedonian version is more epic and enriched with mythical elements, such as petrification (the transformation into stone), which occurs when the sister and mother embrace for the last time. This mythical transformation symbolizes eternity and the unbreakable bond between family members, including their devotion to the deceased brother. Meanwhile, the Albanian ballad focuses on **besa** as a moral code and highlights the tragedy of family separation due to the sister’s marriage far from home, reflecting the influence of patriarchal norms on the social structure (Sinani, 2012). Additionally, Haxhihasani (1982, pp. 8-9) emphasizes that the besa—a central theme in Albanian ballads—represents a binding moral commitment, often more powerful than life itself, embodying loyalty and the strength of family ties that transcend ordinary obligations.

*Kostandin, o biri im, / Kostandin, oh my son,
Ku është besa që më dhe, /Where is the sacred promise you gave me,
Se do t’ më sillje Garentinën. / That you would bring Garentina back to me.*
(Arap, 1986, p. 275)

Scholars have noted that this motif carries a mythical and anthropological dimension closely tied to the cultural models of the Balkans. These societies have historically understood death, resurrection, and the fulfillment of obligations within a framework that connects the living and the dead. Both Albanian and Bulgarian ballads illustrate this through the resurrection of the brother—often due to the tears of the mother or sister—“which reinforces the strength of this collective narrative in Balkan culture” (Karakostea, 1938, p. 118). The respect for the given word and the enduring importance of **besa** are reflected in these ballads, contributing to the moral and social norms shared across the region through oral tradition.

Gender dynamics, and the power of language in the Dead Brother motif

The religious motif in the Dead Brother’s Ballad is deeply embedded in the spiritual heritage of the Balkans, representing a spiritual archetype that transcends cultural and religious boundaries. The resurrected brother, a central figure in these ballads, embodies the theme of resurrection, which bears clear parallels to the Christian narrative of Lazarus’ resurrection by Jesus. In the Bulgarian version of the ballad, the brother is named Lazar, “lending the poem a distinctly Christian tone” (Kulavkova, 2021, p. 45). Lazar rises from the grave to fulfill his duty to his family, reinforcing the theme of **besa** and the power of a kept promise, a theme present in all versions of this ballad across the Balkans.

The name Lazar, derived from Eleazar (meaning “he whom God helped resurrect”), adds a strong religious dimension, linking the ballad to Christian tradition and Lazarus Week, celebrated in honor of Jesus’ miracle of raising Lazarus after four days in the tomb (John 11:1–45). This incorporation of religious imagery allows the ballad to be understood as a folkloric expression of profound spiritual and religious themes. The integration of Christian elements with traditional Balkan beliefs about familial obligations and the soul further highlights the “interconnection between pagan and Christian traditions in the region”, imbuing these ballads with a mystical tone (Puchner, 2016, p. 88).

In addition to the religious symbolism, these ballads provide a rich framework for analyzing gender relationships and traditional familial roles. The Dead Brother’s Ballad emphasizes the complex interactions between male figures and key female figures in the family: the mother, the sister, and, in some versions, the lover. The son’s sacrifice and dedication to these women highlight the expectations of men in patriarchal Balkan societies, particularly in families where the father is absent. These ballads focus on the male figure’s responsibility to fulfill his social and familial obligations, reflecting broader social norms and values. The mother figure, as the central female character, is portrayed as a nurturer and emotional anchor for the family. She represents the source of life, stability, and warmth within the family unit. The emphasis on her fertility, the large number of sons, and her grief over their deaths further reinforces the symbolic significance of the mother as a figure of emotional and familial cohesion. Death, however, “chills” the warmth of these relationships, as seen in the ballads where the mother, sister, and lover experience a cooling of emotions or even petrification, as depicted in some Macedonian versions of the ballad (Verkovic, 1985, p. 92).

In these narratives, the focus is often on the brother-sister relationship, which is presented as a pure and sacred bond, free from the sexual fantasies or incestuous undertones that appear in some Western versions of similar themes.

Scholars such as Çabej have explored how Balkan ballads avoid these elements, focusing instead on affective and symbolic relationships. “This reflects the moral values of patriarchal societies, where familial loyalty and emotional bonds are elevated above other considerations” (Çabej, 1975, p. 45).

The power of language is another key theme in these ballads. The Dead Brother’s Ballad addresses the fatal power of words, which transform into reality, acting in line with the theory of speech acts. Words in these ballads have the power to bless, curse, heal, or harm, underscoring the moral and spiritual weight of promises and oaths. In this context, the ballad serves as a cautionary tale about the responsibilities that come with speaking promises and “how language is intimately connected with spirituality and morality” (Searle, 2003, p. 58).

Moreover, these ballads function as intercultural bridges, preserving cultural values and fostering communication across different societies. This intercultural dialogue, facilitated through ballads, maintains a rich narrative tradition that not only reflects the historical interactions between these cultures but also “plays a crucial role in the construction of shared identities and collective meaning” (Sherrington, 2018, p. 124).

The exploration of Balkan ballads in this context goes beyond their evaluation as artistic forms, instead focusing on their essential role in transmitting the values and principles that have shaped Balkan societies over centuries. These ballads provide insight into the challenges and conflicts faced by these societies, but also “offer opportunities for cooperation and intercultural understanding”, as demonstrated by the shared themes of family loyalty, sacrifice, and the sanctity of promises (Dundes, 1996).

Thus, the Dead Brother motif is not only a reflection of Balkan collective consciousness, but also a powerful vehicle for cultural preservation and dialogue across generations and cultures. Through the repetition of themes such as brotherly love, resurrection, and the fulfillment of promises, these ballads create a symbolic structure that strengthens cultural ties among the Balkan peoples and promotes the construction of shared meaning across the region and beyond.

4. Conclusions

The analysis of the *Dead Brother motif* in Balkan ballads reveals its enduring significance as a narrative deeply embedded in the region’s cultural and social fabric. The motif, prevalent across diverse Balkan cultures including Albanian, Greek, Serbian, and Bulgarian traditions, exemplifies the intricate connections between familial obligations, spirituality, and societal values.

Through recurring themes of love, sacrifice, and the transcendence of death, these ballads not only reflect the patriarchal structures of Balkan societies but also convey universal human experiences of loss, duty, and moral integrity.

One of the most striking aspects of the *Dead Brother motif* is its function as a bridge between the living and the dead, where the brother’s resurrection serves as a symbolic act of fulfilling promises made during life. This reflects a broader cultural emphasis on the power of the spoken word and the concept of *besa*, a word of honor that binds individuals to their commitments even beyond the grave. The motif demonstrates the moral weight of familial obligations and how promises are held as sacred in these societies, underscoring the performative power of language in shaping reality.

In addition to its moral and social significance, the motif carries a profound spiritual dimension, drawing on both Christian and pagan traditions. In the Bulgarian version, for example, the brother is named Lazar, evoking the Christian story of Lazarus’ resurrection, which provides a religious framework that enhances the spiritual and symbolic depth of the ballad. This integration of religious themes with folkloric elements illustrates how Balkan ballads function as cultural mediators, blending spiritual, social, and familial values to convey complex narratives that resonate across different cultural contexts.

The comparative analysis of Albanian and Macedonian versions of the ballad highlights the cultural specificities of each region, with the Albanian focus on *besa* and the Macedonian emphasis on mythical elements like petrification. These variations reflect the adaptability of the motif to different social and historical contexts, while maintaining the core themes of sacrifice and familial loyalty. Despite these differences, the ballads share a common narrative structure that speaks to the shared cultural heritage of the Balkans.

Finally, the study of these ballads through the lens of gender dynamics reveals the central role of women as nurturers and emotional anchors within patriarchal societies. The mother's grief, the sister's loyalty, and their connection to the resurrected brother illustrate the complex interplay of gender, family, and societal expectations. This aspect of the ballads emphasizes the sacrificial role of women, who are often portrayed as the moral and emotional core of the family unit.

In conclusion, the *Dead Brother motif* serves not only as a reflection of Balkan cultural consciousness but also as a powerful narrative tool for promoting intercultural understanding and empathy. By exploring universal themes through the lens of regional specificity, these ballads offer a unique window into the shared values of Balkan societies while fostering a deeper understanding of human experiences across cultural boundaries.

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